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A Bad Day on the Prairie: The Chickasaw County Massacre

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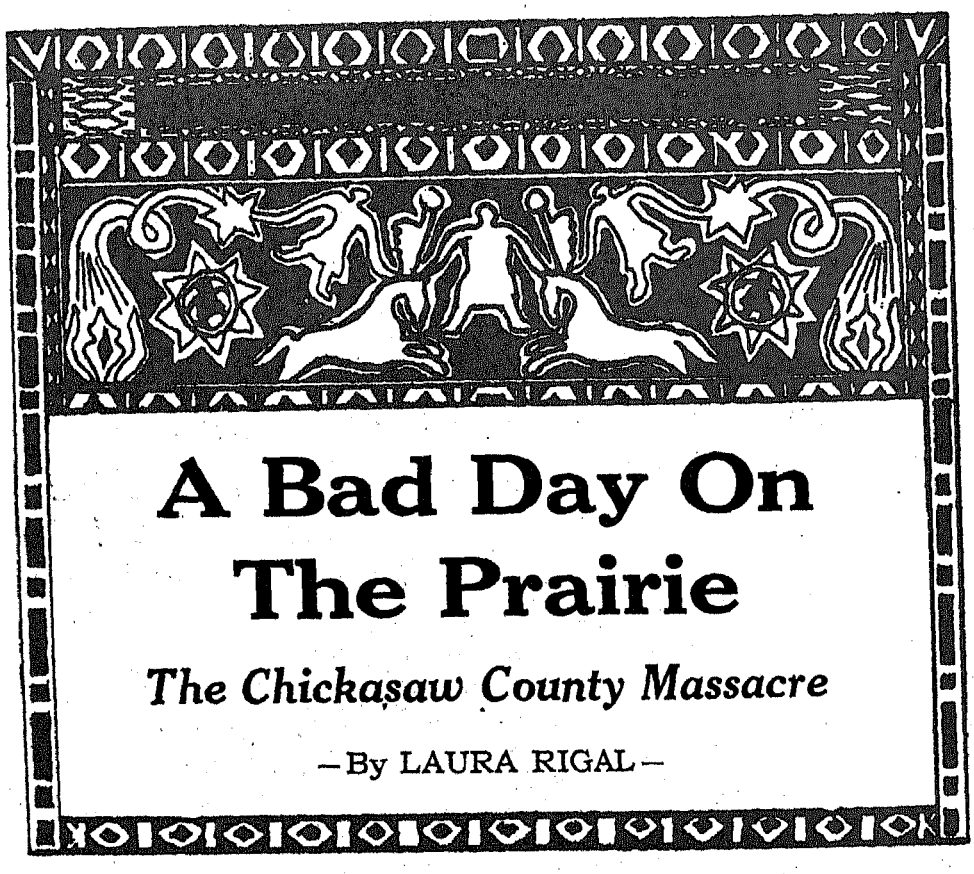


A Bad Day On The Prairie

The Chickasaw County Massacre

—By LAURA RIGAL—

In the middle of June, 2007, I drove to Chickasaw County to investigate a massacre along the upper Wapsipinicon River. I am a professor of American Studies at the University of Iowa, and I have been trying to learn more about the history of Indians in Iowa. Recently I came across a disturbing document. Writing in 1859, a Chickasaw County historian named J. A. Sawin reported that when the first white settlers arrived in Deerfield township, they found hundred of skeletons, including the remains of women and children, scattered over two miles of prairie. These settlers were four white men: Almon Harris of Massachusetts, John Spurr, Myrick Spurr and Edwin Hale. They lived in tents along the upper Wapsi, because wood for building was scarce on the prairie.

Soon after their arrival in 1854, Almon Harris and his neighbors discovered the killing field. County historian Sawin described the discovery five years later. "The southeast quarter of section three abounds with the remains of human skeletons, and on the surrounding prairie, to the distance of two miles, they are occasionally found. When the first settlers came upon the ground in 1854, the stench arising from the slaughter ground was yet quite strong. I have not yet been able to obtain a very clear or authentic account of this massacre, by which several hundred human beings must have lost their lives."

Sawin admits in this passage that he has "not been able to obtain a very clear or authentic" explanation of the "massacre." But he goes on to offer one version of what happened, in the form of an account "obtained at second hand two years ago from a Winnebago Indian:" "About twelve years ago, or say in 1847, a party of Sioux warriors left their old men, women and children, to the number of three hundred or more here

and proceeded to Prairie du Chien. A party of Winnebago warriors found them camping in this unprotected condition and murdered every soul. They then took the road to the Mississippi, and meeting the returning Sioux warriors, settled the affair by paying them fifty ponies as an indemnity."

From Sawin's report alone there is no way of knowing whether this anonymous testimony is true, partly true, exaggerated or invented to terrify the white homesteaders who were known to panic over "Indian attacks." Perhaps the Winnebago really did slaughter 300 Sioux in 1847. But the story is questionable, especially in terms of its chronology. As Sawin himself notes, "The skeletons, many of which were those of infants, corroborate the main facts of [the Winnebago's] account, but the time does not agree with the statements of the first settlers, or the well-known condition of the skeletons in 1856 [sic?], many of which were entire at that time. I think the date of the massacre must be later than that given in the above account."

But, if Sawin doubted the Winnebago's account, I doubted Sawin. He had written that many skeletons were still "entire" in 1856, some two years after their discovery in 1854. But it was unlikely that exposed corpses could remain "entire" between 1854 and 1856 without being disarticulated by decay or dragged and torn by wolves, crows, vultures or coyotes. But then again, perhaps the '6' in 1856 was a printer's error or a slip of Sawin's pen, and he had meant to write 1854...

When I first read Sawin's story I tried to corroborate it. I spent weeks searching through books and articles in the State Historical Society but I could find no further reports of a massacre in Chickasaw County in 1854. This surprised me. And then gradually, it began to raise a number of questions: first about the bones themselves, but then about the twists and turns of memory (and forgetting) and the acts of story telling that make us who we are. Like many Iowans, I had heard of the Spirit Lake massacre of 1857, when 38 white settlers were killed by a group of Wakpadute and Yankton Sioux, led by Inkpaduta or the "Crimson Point." Three white women had been taken captive during the massacre. Only one, Abigail Gardner, survived to publish her tale: the *History of the Spirit Lake Massacre and Captivity of Miss Abbie Gardner* (1885). In addition, I knew one single thing about Chickasaw County. It was the home of "The Little Brown Church," a famous state landmark where since the end of the Civil War, tens of thousands of Iowa couples have gone to be married. And yet, I had never heard of a massacre of more than 300 people along the upper Wapsipinicon River, just 15 miles north of the Little Brown Church.

At first I thought my next step would be a trip to Washington, D.C., or St. Louis. Perhaps there was a massacre report compiled by federal Indian agents stationed in 1854 at Fort Dodge or Prairie du Chien. But then it occurred to me that I should drive to Deerfield township myself and take a look around. Perhaps I could find something on my own in Chickasaw County—bullets, bones, a scalping knife, another document. From the county plat maps I calculated that the massacre site was on the property of a farmer along Cheyenne Avenue, straight north from the town of Nashua. On a cloudy Thursday in June, I set out for the Chickasaw County Historical Society. From its website I learned it was housed in the "Pioneer Village Museum," next door to the Little Brown Church. The director there was a knowledgeable woman named Karen Wilson who had promised to share everything she could find about the massacre. However, on the phone she said that, like me, she knew much more about Spirit Lake and Abbie

Gardner than she did about the massacre in Chickasaw County.

When I arrived at the Historical Society, thunderstorms were forecast and I was in a hurry to get to the massacre site. But, at her desk, Karen had assembled several key resources, including the first printed edition of Sawin's story and, even better, an historical atlas of Chickasaw County from the time of Iowa's purchase from Napoleon in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase.

The atlas provided two pieces of crucial information: Chickasaw County was situated in the middle of what had been, from 1825-1847, the Indian "Neutral Ground." In addition the prairie and riverbeds directly south of the Chickasaw County massacre site had been been populated by Winnebago. A surveyor's map of Bradford township, directly below the massacre site, identified two Indian villages at the juncture of the Cedar and Little Cedar rivers, as well as fields "cultivated by the Indians" (plat sections 9, 15 and 16). These towns and fields were assumed to be Winnebago. Moreover, as Karen explained, Bradford township itself was named for a local Winnebago known as "Chief Bradford." He reportedly ran a trading post at the fork of the Cedar and Little Cedar when the township was first surveyed. As I listened, Karen pointed out a life-sized, painted figure of an Indian standing at the rear of her office. The image was improvised by an Historical Society volunteer, working partly from imagination and (he later told me) partly from pictures of Indians in books. There were no photographs of Chief Bradford, the legendary Winnebago with the Anglo-Indian name. And no texts had been found to document his life. Perhaps he was metis, or mixed blood. But really nothing was known about him — by contrast, for example, with Dr. William Pitt who designed the "Little Brown Church in the Wildwood," and composed the famous Victorian hymn of that name.

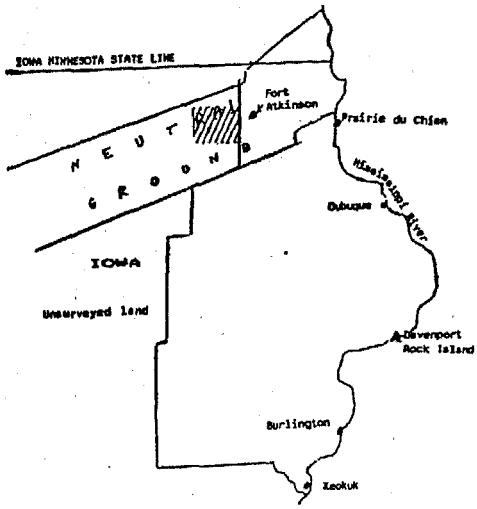
However, Karen's maps revealed something of even more signifiance. Chickasaw County was situated fully within the boundaries of the Indian "Neutral Ground" which, during the 1840's, had doubled as a Winnebago reservation. The Neutral Ground was established through a series of U.S. treaties between 1825 and 1837 in a futile attempt to "neutralize" violence in the upper Mississippi Valley, especially ongoing conflict between the Ioway, Sauk, Fox and Sioux.

By the time of the American Revolution, Indians in the upper Mississippi River Valley had begun to find life increasingly tenuous and crowded, as native groups from the East, displaced by European and U.S. expansion, were pushed west into smaller and smaller areas of land. There they were ringed by old and new enemies with access to fewer natural resources as animal populations were decimated for food and trade. From 1800 to 1865, violence was a fact of life in Iowa, where movements of dislocated tribes from the East had compressed people with stark mutual hatreds into ever smaller territory. Growing poverty aggravated the violence: from 1800 through the 1830's Ioway, Winnebago, Sioux, Sauk and Fox were fighting fiercely with each other, and occasionally with the U.S. government. In 1825, the Sauk massacred several hundred Ioway Indians at Iowaville where the Ioway had gathered unarmed to watch a horse race. Seven years later, Black Hawk's War erupted when the United States attempted to remove Sauk and Fox Indians from their Mississippi River towns and resettle them in Kansas. That war ended in 1832 with the massacre of nearly 800 Sauk and their allies at the battle of Bad Axe. Between 1825 and 1837 treaty negotiations were held at Prairie du Chien, St. Louis and Washington, D.C., in an attempt to bring stability to a region that was rapidly filling with property-seeking farmers

and investors from east of the Mississippi.

According to the agreement that established the Neutral Ground of northern Iowa, the Sauk on one hand and the Sioux on the other each ceded matching strips of land that together created a 40-mile wide and 200-mile long swath of territory. In the eastern third of this territory the Winnebago of Wisconsin were to be installed as a living buffer between the Sioux in the north, and the Sac and Fox to the south. In addition, the agreement stipulated that the Winnebago would be "civilized" through the establishment of a fort, a school, an Indian agent and education in agriculture (for boys), and spinning and sewing (for girls). Until 1848, both the Winnebago and the Neutral Ground were guarded by Fort Atkinson, which was hastily constructed on the military road running west from Prairie du Chien. Ostensibly Fort Atkinson was built to protect the Winnebago from the Sioux above and the Sauk and Fox below. But in fact the dragoons assigned to the fort spent most of their time pursuing Winnebago who persisted in returning to Wisconsin.

However, in 1854 when Almon Harris and his neighbors pitched their tents by the Wapsipinicon, the Neutral Ground was gone and the lines that had established it were erased. Fort Atkinson was empty and the Winnebago themselves were gone, most removed once again, this time to southwest Minnesota. With the signing of new treaties, the Neutral Ground had been dissolved and the Winnebago school disbanded. Black Hawk, the celebrated Sauk warrior, had been dead for 16 years. His skeleton was reportedly preserved in the Burlington Historical Society by order of the governor of Iowa. Smaller groups like the Ioway (closely related to the Wisconsin Winnebago) were living in Kansas and Nebraska. And although military roads and Indian paths crossed the prairie, these were now increasingly



This graphic, based on an 1851 map, depicts early Iowa and the "Neutral Ground" strip designed to separate the warring Sioux and Sac/Fox tribes and protect the resident Winnebago tribe. The buffer strip boundaries were enforced from 1825 until 1847 when the Winnebago were removed to Minnesota. The slanted lines represent what eventually became Chickasaw County.

joined by stagecoach lines. It was by stagecoach that Dr. William Pitt had arrived in Bradford township in 1857, the year of the Spirit Lake Massacre. On his way to visit his fiancee in another town, he was struck by Bradford's picturesque beauty, and went home to compose his song "The Little Brown Church," which soon was made famous on the Chatauqua circuit by the Weatherwax Brothers of Charles City. As I stood in the Historical Society, thumbing through 19th-century photographs of Pitt and the Weatherwax Brothers, I realized how vivid and well-documented their lives seemed, compared to the half-legendary Chief Bradford and the faint record of Winnebago villages by the Cedar River. It seemed as though the massacre of 38 white settlers at Spirit Lake was well recorded and remembered (with the exception of the historically "shadowy" Inkpaduta and his band). In a failed attempt to have a summer vacation, I even had visited the stone memorial to the Spirit Lake Mas-

sacre in 2001 at Lake Okoboji. But the Chickasaw County massacre, in which as many as 300 men, women, and children were killed, had no public memorial and no apparent record outside of Sawin's manuscript of 1859.

As I was leaving the Pioneer Villiage, Karen gave me the names of a retired local farmer and a retired deputy sheriff both of whom had tried to find the massacre site after reading Sawin's account in the *History of Chickasaw County*. But neither they nor anyone else ever had found artifacts or bones in section three of Deerfield township. Beyond this, Karen said, there was not much more to say.

Outside the Historical Society an elderly man in blue overalls gave me directions to Cheyenne Avenue (named for some reason after the Cheyenne Indians of the northern Plains) which would take me north. As I began to drive past fertile fields and over bridges, the landscape of Chickasaw County unfolded mostly as I had imagined: green and rolling, partly forested, drained by innumerable small creeks and rivers. In the 1600's, the French had called this part of Iowa "the little prairie," and the Ioway Indians who lived there "the little Prairie Sioux." Now the prairie was platted farmland, rich in cows, corn and the greenhouses of newly arrived Mennonite farmers. Like Almon Harris, I was venturing onto land that was inhabited by people I didn't know. What did Harris think, I wondered, when he came across the skeletons scattered across the blooming prairie? Did he immediately assume that these were the bodies of Sioux or Winnebago? Or did he imagine that these were the skeletons of white homesteaders like himself? Or perhaps of a white army slaughtered by Indians, or of Indians slaughtered by a white army? Was he aware of the decades of violence in northeast Iowa that had resulted in the creation of the Neutral Ground? "How neutral was it?" —he might have asked himself —or "Neutral for whom?"

When the stench of skeletons greeted Almon Harris beside the winding Wapsipinicon, massacre stories had been circulating for decades. The early white settlers, and Sawin after them, must have heard many reports and rumors of violence, some in print and some by word-of-mouth. Black Hawk's *Autobiography* alone testifies to killings large and small: Sauk massacres of Osage and Ioway (and visa-versa), Indian attacks on white settlers in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa, and white assaults on Indians by homesteaders, traders and the U.S. army. For example in 1832, after white settlers dammed Indian Creek in western Illinois, depriving an Indian village downstream of water, Sauk and Potawatami attacked the settlement, killing 15 homesteaders and taking two girls captive. The girls were ransomed with the aid of local Winnebago. In Iowa, in January, 1854, a white whiskey trader named Henry Lott murdered a Wahpekute Sioux named Sidominadotah along with his mother, wife, another woman and four children, on a creek in Humboldt County, Iowa, known ever afterwards as Bloody Run. Lott was seeking revenge for the murder of his own wife and son by Sidominadotah, who had killed them in retaliation for ponies stolen by Lott. After Sidominadotah's murder, his skull was carried to Homer, Iowa, in Webster County, and nailed to a house where it hung for over a year. Sidominadotah, it turns out, was Inkpaduta's brother, and this episode was one cause of the Spirit Lake massacre three years later. In 1857, Sidomindotah's skull—"showing many fractures as if it had been beaten with a club"—arrived in the frontier law office of Granville Berkly who kept it, he said, because the murdered Indian had been his friend.

It is likely then that when Almon Harris of Massachusetts came upon the skeletons, he imagined human violence.

"From 1800 to 1865, violence was a fact of life in Iowa, where movements of dislocated tribes from the East had compressed people with stark mutual hatreds into ever smaller territory."

Harris probably also assumed from the stench that the violence had been recent. It occurred to me as I drove north that even the stench — which makes Sawin's report so vivid or "real"—could not be used to date the time of death. If the mass killing had occurred during the previous fall or winter, the corpses would have remained frozen for months before spring, when the odor of decay would be evident. Furthermore, human corpses retain the stench of decomposition for years if they are buried underground. Perhaps the skeletons were not that of a massacre, but from an Indian burial site or mound, that had been disturbed by animals or humans. And yet, Sawin reports, many of the remains were "entire" at the time. And a corpse unearthed from a burial mound would likely not be intact.

I was approaching the address of the farm on Cheyenne Avenue where I hoped to find the massacre site. Storm clouds had followed me up from Nashua, and I could hear the thunder as I pulled into the driveway by a cluster of two houses and several barns between two cornfields. My car crunched to a standstill and I jumped out. Silence. I walked around the barns and pounded on the door. Everything was quiet, except for the wind and one doorbell, which greeted me with an entire stanza of "Yankee Doodle." There was no one home. From the stoop I gazed across the fields stretching alongside Cheyenne Avenue. I knew I could be looking at the massacre site somewhere out there beneath the corn or under the trees.

Hesitant to plunge through the fields without permission, I decided to try another farm down the road where I could see a farmer and his two sons at work repairing a tractor. They were dressed as Mennonites: the girl children of the family, in blue dresses and neat bonnets, stared out at me from the front door as I walked up to their father and brothers. Had they heard of a local massacre site? Had they or their neighbors found any bones? Did they know a man named Kobliska? (Kobliska was the name of a property owner in the vicinity of the massacre site). The farmer listened but knew nothing about any massacre. He had heard of the Kobliskas however. He gave me directions to their dry goods store—down the road and around a curve — and I set off.

I headed west and within 15 minutes I realized the directions must be wrong. There was no sign of a store anywhere among the farms and greenhouses or along the gravel roads. I was driving away from the southeast corner of section three, and the storm had caught up with me when I glimpsed a town ahead. So I decided I should make one last stop in tiny Alta Vista before the rain hit. By now it was 5 p.m., and, as I pulled into Alta Vista, I realized that everything was closed. The rain began to fall and, in the face of the storm, I decided to give up. But as I was turning the car around, I spotted a Public Library, housed together with the Town Hall in a tiny white wooden box of a building. Having a kind of faith in small town libraries, I decided to stop.

Contained in one-and-a-half rooms, the Alta Vista Library was lined with mystery novels and novels for young adults. As I entered, the town's librarian was checking out books to a group of children. I walked up to her desk, feeling rather lost: "I don't suppose," I said,

"you've ever heard of an Indian massacre site somewhere around here." To my amazement the librarian responded, "Oh yes, my husband has taken me there. Women and children were killed. It's down the Cheyenne Road, right across from the sand quarry — in that field across the road, a little farther down from the quarry."

"I saw that sand pit!" I said. "I know where that is. How do you know about it?" She said, "Oh, from my husband's parents. They're old and they've lived here forever. They told him." And then she added, "But I've never seen any bones or anything."

The wind had picked up and I heard thunder as I drove as fast as I could back to the sand pit. It was raining now. Across the road from the piles of sand and the dump trucks, I pulled off onto a dirt road leading back through the cornfields. The wooded Wapsipinicon snaked through the field. I got out. I was there! I had found it. Maybe. Of course, I couldn't know for sure — not without careful examination, excavating and searching for the remains of something that, so far, no one seems to have documented since 1859. I was at the edge of waist high corn. I walked down a furrow. The far end of the field was heavily wooded, and not tilled. There could be bones back there. Lightning was streaking from the clouds to the ground, and a powerful wind had begun to blow the rain nearly horizontal. There were tornadoes forecast and only one small line of whitish sky remained to the north. In the downpour, with my camera, I snapped two pictures of the street sign to mark the location. Then I scrambled back to my car and headed home.

Like Sawin's manuscript, my journey to Chickasaw County is the story of a surface. To explain the skeletons of 1854 (if such a thing is possible) I will have to dig much deeper. But for now, one conclusion has emerged, and that is the irony of the Neutral Ground. When the U.S. demanded neutrality in the 1830's from the Sauk, Winnebago, Ioway and Sioux, the treaty negotiators all, without exception, saw themselves as peacemakers. But in fact, neutrality in the Neutral Zone simply meant that the United States had the monopoly on "the big stick" of violence, in the form of weaponry, forts and soldiers. The U.S. was not neutral in the Neutral Zone it had established under law. Moreover, it didn't work. As the history of failed federal Indian policy reveals, "peace" can neither be legislated into existence, nor generated by the removal of unassimilable people.

But there is a second irony as well. In 1854, when Almon Harris was staking his claim in the ex-Neutral Ground, peace and neutrality had utterly eluded the peacemakers themselves. The United States had just won an unjust war with Mexico (taking Texas, California, etc.), and was about to begin a long and bloody Civil War, in which 600,000 soldiers would die. In other words all the lines the state's peacemakers had drawn and written between 1830 and 1859 (maps, treaties, letters, records, reports) did nothing to clarify or correct their own relationship to war. On the contrary, maps and treaties seem to obscure acts of violence by making them disappear into the apparent neutrality of government documents and archives.

Perhaps all acts of founding violence (the revolutions or removals or massacres upon which states are founded) are, by definition, denied, erased or forgotten. But the act of remembering or naming the dead, like unearthing the graves of mass atrocities (in Armenia, Guatemala, Cambodia, Rwanda, South Africa, Iraq, etc.) is a task of significance in which writing and science can participate without necessarily serving the state. Furthermore, memories of founding violence can be found outside of reading, writing and published records. Ordinary stories, in local commu-

nities, can also preserve the memory of past violence and the ongoing need for reconciliation and reparation—including perhaps, forms of reparation that are found in traditions outside Western European laws and economies. From this point of view, it is worth revisiting the story of the massacre offered by the anonymous Winnebago in Sawin's account.

Although the chronology of the story may be dubious, the Winnebago testimony indicates two things. First it registers the presence of Winnebago in northeast Iowa through the 1840's and '50s. Second, its reference to "settling the affair" of the massacre with a "payment" to the Sioux of 50 ponies, registers a longstanding Native practice of reciprocity or "repayment." This could be in goods (such as ponies), or through the adoption of captives, or through reciprocal murders in kind, as a way of assuaging trauma and reestablishing social order. What might the place of such non-western, extra-legal, or "tribal" practices of reciprocity be, I wonder, within a history dominated by the victor's cultural forms—by the legal, economic and cultural forms of European and Euro-American states? The Winnebago's story was preserved in Sawin's manuscript and in the printed history of Chickasaw County. But, I encountered the persistence of oral as well as written stories, or "lore," during my journey to Chickasaw County. Perhaps if the Winnebago's testimony was reimagined as an oral telling or narrative, it can be understood another way. Perhaps the story about the slaughter of 300 Sioux by Winnebago was an act of making fun of, or playing on, stereotyped white expectations about Indian violence and/or Indian gullibility. If the Winnebago story was offered in response to a white questioner, perhaps it played on settler paranoia about "Indians" generally, and on mid-19th century panics about impending Indian attacks and probable "massacres" of whites by the southern and eastern Sioux. After Spirit Lake, the Sioux, and rumors of the Sioux, especially worried the future farmers of Chickasaw County. As events show—from the Spirit Lake Massacre, to the 1863 Santee Sioux uprising in Minnesota, to the killing of Custer's cavalry in 1876 at Little Big Horn, the numerous bands of Sioux (and their allies) were not neutralized during the years Sawin was writing his sketch and Dr. Pitts composing his song. County historians of the period have recounted several local panics in nervous rural Iowa settlements in the face of actual and rumored massacres. Throughout the middle and late 19th century, rural white settlers repeatedly panicked over impending "attacks." The majority of such panics would prove to be nothing. Eventually the experience of panic, terror and flight would even be treated humorously, as a comic event recounted over the fire by small town neighbors and friends.

Today in rural Chickasaw County, the massacre story has a life of its own. Like the librarian at the Alta Vista public library, many local residents have "heard" of the massacre. But few, outside the Historical Society, can trace the story's origin to Sawin. In other words, Sawin's written report had become local lore, passed on orally without reference to its print source. Townspeople, farmers and families have learned of the site in face-to-face communications from older neighbors and family members. This suggests that there might be other stories and other memory communities—*outside* the print archive—where what happened in Chickasaw County can be recovered. Perhaps Winnebago, Sioux, Ioway, or Sauk and Mesquaki communities preserve the memory of what happened and to whom in the upper Mississippi River Valley—where groups of Indians encountered one another and the newer, white immigrants during their journeys along the upper Wapsipinicon and across the prairie. □

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